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VIOLENCE IN RIOTS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

(This paper is going to be included as a chapter in the forthcoming book Johnston H, Seferiades S. (eds.) Violent Protest, Contentious Politics, and the Neoliberal State, Cambridge: Ashgate Publishers.)
Riots draw a variety of people for a variety of reasons. . . . Different groups of people participate in different ways on different days . . . arrest records merely capture a slice of time, an incomplete picture.

A. Miller (1999)

The aim of this paper is to underline the crucial differences between riots and social movements by analyzing three different aspects of riots: (1) their dynamic of discontinuity, volatility, and alternation; (2) their temporal and spatial limitations as challenges to social order; and (3) the contested political identities of rioters. I will emphasize that riots\(^1\) differ from and should not be equated with social movements. Rather than analyzing riots as unified events, riots should be disaggregated into multiple, variable, smaller events, in which the protagonists, the repertoires, and the reasons for participating may not only differ but may also be contradictory.

Moreover, riots express and are bound by the socio-economic and spatial immobility of their participants in contrast to social movements, which have the ability to shift their mobilization to a broader spatial and political scale. Finally, claims making and political identities in riots challenge perceptions about politics that are based on strict dualities, such as political-nonpolitical. However, taking into account these differences, the two concepts should not be juxtaposed or perceived as mutually exclusive, since riots may take place within a social movement’s cycle of protest (e.g., the Watts riots of 1965 occurred within the broader context of the civil rights

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\(^{1}\) The concept *riot* is a highly contested concept. In spite of that, I use the concept *riot* in order to explore the differences between riots on the one hand and social movements on the other. This does not imply that riots in this paper are perceived as irrational or unorganized collective events.
movement) and social movements may emerge from riot events (e.g., the 1984 riots in Lawrence, Massachusetts and the formation of the Alliance for Peace).

In order to illustrate the differences between riots and social movements, I will review and analyze scholarship on the 1992 Los Angeles riots and on the 2005 riots in the outer suburbs of French cities. I will theorize the findings and compare them with what we know about social movements.

THE 1992 LOS ANGELES RIOTS

Multiple riots took place in American cities in the 1960s. After the Watts riots erupted in 1965 in Los Angeles, no less than 164 other riots occurred in other U.S. cities, most within the broader context of the African American civil rights movement. They were a manifestation of a political culture of resistance in the African-American community as well as a statement of growing black power in American cities. In these riots, the black anger at the racial divide that marked American society, the violent confrontations with the police, as well as the looting and destruction of white owned shops dominated. In the 1992 Los Angeles Riots there were some common

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2 The Watts Riots took place in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California in 1965. The riots began on August 11, when a highway motorcycle patrol officer arrested an African-American driver and two members of his family. Events escalated and the large-scale riot that consequently took place lasted for six days leading to the death of 34 people, the injury of 2032 and to 3952 arrests.

3 The population of Lawrence, Massachusetts, was comprised of numerous ethnic and racial groups. During the late 1960s many Hispanic immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries as well as Asians settled in Lawrence increasing the number of migrant communities (e.g. Irish, French-Canadian, Italian, German, Jewish, English). Tensions between whites and Hispanic youths escalated into a riot in 1984. The rioters came mainly from the Hispanic community, but there were also some white-working class participants. During the riots, some of the rioters founded a grassroots citizen organization (Alliance for Peace) in order to curb collective violence and channel the demands of the Hispanic community to the governmental and community level (Duran 1985).

4 In the urban riots of the sixties deadly violence against persons was mainly used by the police. In the 1980 Miami Riots and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, on the other
elements with the urban riots of the sixties, such as black anger at institutional racism, but also new aspects came to the foreground concerning urban conflict in the post-civil rights era.

On March 3, 1991, four white Los Angeles Police Department officers arrested black motorist Rodney King after a high-speed chase. A nearby resident videotaped the police officers brutally beating King while he was lying on the ground. The incident was broadcast worldwide. On April 29, 1992, a predominantly white jury acquitted all four police officers involved in the incident. Shortly afterwards, crowds started assembling and the protest quickly escalated into widespread riots. Rioting lasted more than a week and Marine and Army units were called in to restore order. During the riots, 53 people were killed and thousands were injured in Los Angeles, while smaller riots took place in cities such as San Francisco, Seattle, Atlanta, Las Vegas and Pittsburgh.

The Los Angeles riots illustrate significant changes in the contemporary urban ghettos of American cities. In his analysis of black ghettos Wacquant (1993, 1998) claims that since the early seventies, ghettos have witnessed a violent transformation. The end of the post-Fordist era, deindustrialization and the contraction of the wage-labor economy as well as increased flexibility in the new service sectors have led to the erosion of stable-wage labor relations, a sharp increase of unemployment and the continuing marginalization of the unskilled and unqualified urban poor. This

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5 The trial did not take place in Los Angeles County. It was transferred to Simi Valley, a predominantly white and conservative city in Ventura County. The jury was composed of Ventura County residents (ten whites, one Asian and one Hispanic) (Linder 2001).

6 From June 1990 to February 1992 more than 300,000 jobs were lost in Los Angeles. In the South Central district, four workers in ten were unemployed (Pearson and Kirby 1993).
economic restructuring was coupled with a significant rollback of the public sector. Federal funds for urban and community development were severely cut, while welfare programs and unemployment coverage shrunk. The public sector withdrew from the provision of goods and services (housing, health care, physical safety, education, etc.) that affect social conditions in ghettos as well as opportunities for their residents. Moreover, improved socioeconomic status of a significant number of black ghetto residents, has led to their departure from the inner city ghettos and their resettlement in the suburbia. This process signified their move into the middle and professional classes. It had, however, a negative effect on those left behind. Living conditions in the ghettos deteriorated, while the institutional density of the communities was undermined. The disparities between the inner-city ghettos and the suburban rings increased. According to Wacquant (1993), these transformations have led to the gradual erosion of the ghettos’ civic and organizational base. Thus, a distinctive feature of contemporary American ghettos is the lack of organizations that can support community functions, as well as the struggle of their residents for social goods. For Wacquant, American ghettos today differ from the ‘communal ghettos’ of the post-war years that were inhabited by black people from all classes (Wacquant 1993). In these “communal ghettos,” strong collective identities, viable organizations, and social networks made them places of potential political mobilization. Contemporary ghettos, on the contrary, have assumed the form of a ‘hyperghetto’, a socially and ethnically homogenous enclave, which brings together the most dispossessed, marginalized and racially segregated segments of American society.\(^7\)

\(^7\) Wacquant’s description of contemporary ghettos has been criticized for overlooking “that the African American experience is not monolithic,” and leaving no room “for an analysis of class diversity and related conflict within the enclave”. See White, 2007: 372, 373.
Wacquant’s analysis highlights that recent changes in the black urban ghettos of the United States have decreased the chances for sustained long-term mobilizations.

The Los Angeles Riots started in an African-American neighborhood with violence against whites (e.g. Reginald Oliver Denny a white track driver). However, they did not evolve into a typical race riot. On the second day, attacks centered on the Korean American community, with widespread and systematic looting and destruction of Korean stores in the African-American community. The Los Angeles Riots illustrated vividly that in order to understand contemporary urban conflict in American cities one must look not only at the racial divide (black/white), but also at the inter-minority conflicts that have been generated by recent immigration patterns.

During the 1970s and the 1980s Korean small businesses started opening across the United States. This was especially the case in South Central Los Angeles, where Korean grocers lived outside black neighborhoods, while running their stores in these neighborhoods. Tensions between the African-American and the Korean communities had escalated just before the riots, due to the shooting death of a fifteen year-old African-American girl (Latashe Harlins) by a Korean shop-owner in March 1991. There were, however, more longstanding tensions between the two communities. In Los Angeles, massive immigration of Asians and Hispanics had led to the further marginalization of the black community. African-Americans violence against the Korean community expressed their frustration and anger at being pushed down the economic ladder once more by a new group of migrants. The ethnic conflict

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8 On 16th March 1991 Latasha Harlins was shot in the back of the head by Korean immigrant Soon Ja Du in the Empire Liquor Market, which was owned by Du’s family. Du shot Harlin, believing she was a shoplifter. She was convicted of voluntary manslaughter, but the sentence given to her (five years probation) enraged the African-American Community of Los Angeles. (Gray 2007).

9 From 1970 to 1990 the proportion of the African-American population in Los Angeles County remained stable, however the share of Hispanics rose from 15% to 37% and the share of Asians from 2.5% to 10.5% (Di Pasquale and Glaeser 1998).
between the two communities was, to a certain extent, also a class conflict between
ghetto residents and ghetto merchants. African-Americans accused Koreans of not
hiring any blacks and of making a profit out of their marginalized communities. In
this case, ethnicity became an indicator of class position (Davis 1993; Rosenfeld
1997). Los Angeles Riots revealed a socio-economic divide between the ‘haves’
(whites and Asians) and the ‘have-nots’ (Hispanics and African-Americans). Even
though not all whites or Asians are rich and not all Hispanics or African-Americans
are poor, this divide illustrates the fierce competition between the communities to
defend or enhance their socio-economic position within the broader context of severe
economic recession at that time and rapid demographic change.

In post-Watts Los Angeles another significant element has been the rise of
black gangs.\footnote{In the early 1970s, black gangs were influenced by the black liberation movement’s
rhetoric about community control of neighborhoods. The early seventies were marked
by the extraordinary rise and expansion of the Crips gang. The Bloods gang was
formed subsequently, as a reaction to the rise of the Crips. By the early 1980s gangs
had spread to the largest cities in the U.S.A. In the 1990s, Los Angeles’ major gangs
(Crips and Bloods) had already evolved into mega-gangs, which had multiple
branches outside Los Angeles. See Davis 1990; Taylor 2008; Umemoto 2006.} Gangs have had an immense influence on life in the urban ghettos.
They have intensified the vulnerability of ghettos’ residents, because of the excessive
use of physical violence and they have contributed to the spread of the drug trade.
Gangs, however, are a very heterogeneous phenomenon. They differ according to
issues like culture, political activism, and how central criminality is to their core
mission (Varano 2004). During the Los Angeles Riots the two major gangs of Los
Angeles (Crips and Bloods) participated in the riots and became politicized. The two
gangs called a truce, in order to reduce violence in the black community, contribute to
the creation of work opportunities, and promote black activism. Although gang
violence reemerged occasionally in Los Angeles, sustained efforts to maintain the
truce led to the formation of community-based organizations (e.g. the UNITY One organization, which is active in intervention and prevention at the community level) (Katz 2008).

The dynamic of urban conflict is also shaped by a city’s political structures and local history. The local context is significant for understanding the intensity, duration and scale of riots. In her comparative analysis of the cities of New York and Los Angeles, Abu-Lughold found that in New York, where political structures have been more conciliatory, riots have led to specific gains for the African-American community (e.g. housing, schools). In Los Angeles, by contrast, the militarized structure of the police, the lack of organized and sustained black political power and the domination of political structures that are not receptive to minority representation in local government (e.g. city councils) have led to more violent riots, which have not been followed by any tangible gains for the African-American community (Abu-Lughold 1997, 2007).

In the case of Los Angeles, there were many structural factors present that can also be observed in different cities that have experienced similar events of large-scale rioting.11 Chronic poverty, unemployment, income inequalities, unequal consumer

11 The large number and the severity of riots that occurred in the sixties led to a wide-ranging academic debate and multiple empirical studies on the underlying structural causes of riots. The research focused on the correlation between structural factors and the frequency or severity of riots. Few studies pinned down a limited number of specific variables affecting riots (e.g. Lieberson and Silverman (1965), Spilerman (1970)). Many studies were also conducted into the individual attributes of rioters. Empirical research showed that the urban riots of the sixties cut across class, income, educational level and occupational status. The only difference between rioters and non-rioters was that rioters were usually younger. Thus, the studies did not demonstrate that rioters share any typical and distinctive attributes. One must take into account, however, that the urban riots of the sixties took place in the broader context of the civil rights movement, thereby affecting the boundaries between rioters and non-rioters.
services (e.g., poor schools, inadequate housing, lack of access to health care, poor transportation), lack of political representation, marginalization, urban relegation, police bias and brutality, racial discrimination, stigmatization, spatial segregation, significant shifts in institutional policies and the emergence of new forms of governmentality are elements that can be found also in the French cities, which saw riots in 2005. However, structural factors can give us information about the context in which rioting occurs, they cannot provide an adequate insight into the fragmented, complex and volatile evolution of riots.

The Los Angeles riots started with violent attacks on civilians, the destruction of private and public property and looting by African-Americans. However, the protagonists in these riots were not only African-Americans but also Hispanics. The participation of Hispanics followed that of African Americans and was characterized by far more extensive looting. Thus looting took place on different days by different groups for different reasons. The Kerner Report (1968) on the urban riots of the sixties in American cities concluded that initially looting and property destruction was targeted against symbols of the white establishment. However, as the riots evolved, property destruction took the form of creating looting opportunities. Research indicates that collective violence usually takes place in the first days of a riot. As rioting proceeds, new actors may join in to take advantage of the circumstances (Martin, McCarthy and McPhail 2009; Bergesen 1982; Miller 1999). Thus, the same collective or individual behavior (looting) may imply different things in different episodes of rioting. The anger of the African-American community was about racial injustice in United States and declining living conditions in their communities. On the other hand, it was the newest immigrants from Mexico or Central America who suffered most severely from the nationwide economic recession. It is not surprising
therefore that the most extensive looting outside the African-American neighborhoods
took place in districts with Mexican or Central American residents (the eastern half of
South Central Los Angeles and neighborhoods like Hollywood and McArthur Park).

After an extensive review of films and videotapes of the 1992 Los Angeles
Riots and the 1965 Watts Riots, Clark McPhail concluded that:

– Every individual in the riot area did not engage in violence
– Those who did engage in violence – vandalism, looting, arson, or
  assault – did not do so continuously or exclusively
– Despite repeated references to “mob violence,” the majority of violent
  acts were carried out by individuals or small groups, not collectively by
  all nor even most of the larger gathering.
– Thus, riots are not a uniform blanket of continuous and mutually
  inclusive violence. Riots are patchworks or kaleidoscopes of individual
  and collective, nonviolent and violent, alternating and varied action”

(McPhail 1994:12)

Based on this discussion, it is best to conceptualize riots as continuous but
fragmented processes of forming and dissolving, during which multiple shifts occur
from planned to spontaneous, nonviolent to violent, collective to individual actions
and vice versa. This volatile flow distinguishes riots from social movements, which
also entail a diversity of actors, repertoires, and claims, but are always characterized
by a certain degree of coordination, formalization, or organization. Moreover, in
social movements political strategies and articulated claims are quite visible, but in
riots, the aims and claims of participants remain obscure and/or contradictory. The
absence of a clear and comprehensive agenda is of course related to the volatile nature
of riots (e.g., conflicts emerging in riots may vary across space and time; riots evolve in multiple, localized and fragmented centers; a diversity of actors is involved). The lack of a clear framework in riots opens up space for individuals or groups to join in also for their own private or collective reasons. As one community member stated concerning the Lawrence riots (1984): “The riots …meant something different to everyone involved…everybody joined in for some of the same reasons…but your own private reasons too.” (Duran 1985: 47). Compared to social movements, riots are also more dependent on real-time, microlevel dynamics of interpersonal encounters due to the absence of a structured framework. However, riots are not devoid of meaning. When rioters are interviewed about their participation, they usually invoke identity frames to justify their decision. Riots also do not preclude the participation of organized collectivities with clear objectives. In the urban riots in American cities during the sixties, some civil rights organizations got involved in order to redirect the anger and put an end to the violence in black communities. In the 1981 urban riots in Britain, leftist groups participated in the riots, but with their own agenda (Rex 1982). Still, in riots, organized collectivities are usually unable to control the dynamic of events or to assume a leadership role.

Riots differ from social movements also in relation to public perceptions about rioters’ identity. Riots usually spark fierce public debate about whether they are meaningful protests or meaningless disruptions. The conflictual interpretation of riots is, of course, related to the issue of collective violence that riots entail, as well as to the lack of a clearly articulated mobilizing frames. However, it is also related to

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12 For instance, in the Watts Riots of 1965, no single point of origin could be traced. Rioting took place in a number of different and spatially separate incidents.
13 Hacker and Harmetz demonstrated in their study that the frames rioters used to justify their participation in the riots referred usually to identity affirmation as an individual or a group (Hacker, Harmetz 1969).
public perceptions about who is justified to be a political subject and who is not. Rioting entails a process of “subjectification”¹⁴ meaning that people or collectivities that participate in riots emerge as new claim-making subjects. The everyday functioning of the political system is based on a series of regularities and patterns that entail classifications (e.g., what is political, what is non-political). As Oliver and Myers state (1999:40), “public life is ritualized and organized, so that public actions generally…are meaningful to participants and observers.” In these classifications both the formal representatives of the political system as well as the contenders of the existing political order are perceived as political subjects. Thus, the patterns of everyday political processes (political interactions or conflicts) shape, influence and consolidate our perceptions about the agents of the political sphere. For instance in the past, many social movements, such as feminism or gay rights, challenged formal politics, emerged as new claims making subjects, and succeeded in broadening the political arena by redefining what could be politicized. However, social movements are to a certain extent ritualized and organized. Social movements are persistent in time, articulate clear objectives, follow certain norms and patterns, and make public the conflicts they are involved in through campaigns, tactical repertoires, public performances of their worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (Tilly 2004). Riots, on the other hand, are not organized as a unified protest event; they do not articulate any comprehensive and clear agenda and collective expression in riots remains episodic and fragmented. Thus, even though riots enter with extreme force into the public sphere, they do not follow the rules of organized and ritualized public life, making them difficult to decipher. They also defy the typical classifications and conventions of public life, such as the political-nonpolitical divide. In riots, new

¹⁴ For the process of ‘subjectification’ see Nyers 2010.
people and collectivities, who may have been previously absent in formal or contentious politics, emerge as claim-making subjects, thereby intensifying the confusion about the political or non-political identity of rioters. In the Los Angeles riots many participants were young African-Americans, who did not participate in the formal structures of their communities and had distanced themselves from the established African-American leadership (Jacobs 1993). They questioned the legitimacy of their political representatives, while the latter, together with older generations questioned the entitlement of young rioters to act as claims making subjects, due to their prior involvement in criminal and illicit activities. This conflict was even more clearly illustrated in the case of the Los Angeles gangs. The Crips and Bloods participated in the riots, but afterwards called a truce for the first time to articulate specific claims in their communities, especially unemployment. The politicization of the two gangs was either rejected by broader society as a manoeuvre to advance their illicit activities, or was received by their own community with great skepticism. In a similar vein, the 2001 riots in Britain and the 2005 riots in France also revealed conflict-ridden communities.  

The Los Angeles Riots were extremely visible and succeeded in disrupting the political system. However, rioters are not usually able to operate at a variety of temporal and spatial scales. Thus, in Los Angeles riots it was harder to sustain mobilization on a broader political scale. The French Riots of 2005 illustrate clearly

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15 During the summer of 2001 in Britain there was extensive rioting in the northern towns of Bradford, Burnley and Oldham (former important industrial sites) by young Asians (second- or third- generation migrants, primary of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin). During the riots the diversity and conflicts within the Asian communities became apparent. Second- and third- generation immigrants clashed with their community leaders, while the first- generation immigrants, distanced themselves and did not participate in the riots. See Waddington and King 2009; Hussain and Bagguley 2005; Amin 2003; Webster 2003.
the case.

THE 2005 URBAN RIOTS IN FRANCE

On 27th October 2005, three teenagers from Clichy-sous-Bois (in the Parisian district of Seine-Saint-Denis) were returning home, after a football game with friends, when they saw a police patrol. Believing that the police was chasing them, they tried to hide in an electrical power station, where two of them were electrocuted. On the same night violent confrontations between the police and the local youths took place. A few days later, rioting spread to the urban outskirts of Paris, and then spread to 274 cities all over France. The riots lasted almost three weeks. During this period there were violent confrontations with the police (e.g. use of petrol bombs), attacks on public property (e.g., 233 public buildings were burnt) and private property (e.g. 10,000 private vehicles were burnt), but looting was limited. There were no fatal attacks on civilians during the riots. Riots have occurred regularly in the outer suburbs of major cities since the 1980s. Between 1990 and 2004 there were approximately 10 to 15 local unrests every year. The novelty of the 2005 riots was the prolonged duration and widespread diffusion of the riots across the national territory, including some smaller and less urbanized cities (Jobard 2008).

The riots took place in suburbs (or banlieues) that were poor, marginalized, and with a high percentage of ethnic and racial minorities (Cesari 2005; Coole 2005; Body-Gendrot 2007). In the post-War period (1953-1973) the banlieues were

16 The riots that were provoked by the accident of the two teenagers were confined to the locality of the event. However, when few days later a tear gas grenade was thrown by police forces into an entrance to a mosque in Clichy-sous-Bois and Nicola Sarkozy, then Interior Minister, refused to apologize for police’s behavior, rioting spread quickly to a large number of other localities (Jobard 2009, 2005).

constructed to provide a solution to the housing problem of working-class families. They were inhabited by migrants of rural areas, middle-class families and migrants of former French colonies. When the economic crisis of the 1970s occurred, many native-born French abandoned the banlieues, which became increasingly inhabited by immigrants. Today they are inhabited mainly by immigrants from other European countries, the region of Maghreb, other African countries and poor white French.18

Even though the banlieues are not ethnically or racially homogenous enclaves, they share some common traits with the African-American ghettos as chronic poverty, exclusion from the labor market, poor schools, inadequate housing, lack of access to health care, police bias and abuse, discrimination and stigmatization, urban relegation, spatial isolation and political exclusion.19 The inhabitants of the banlieues comprise a significant section of the unskilled working class in France. They have been negatively affected by deindustrialization and the severe cutbacks in funds for social and urban programs. This has led to the expansion of the informal economy in the housing projects. In recent years the banlieues have seen a significant shift in institutional policies towards tighter security measures and immigration laws. These trends together with the rise of islamophobia have intensified the stigmatization of the population living in the Urban Sensitive Zones (‘ZUS’) as well as the frequency of lengthy encounters with the police and ID checks. Moreover, many banlieues had to face recently urban renovation projects or demographic changes due to the settlement

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18 In the banlieues the proportion of migrants is three times higher and unemployment is 50% higher than the national average. The proportion of people under 25 years old is one third higher and of single-parent families twice higher than the national average (Jobard 2008).
19 Loic Wacquant in his comparison of the French banlieues to the black American ghettos has found significant differences. Wacquant’s findings sparked an academic debate on the patterns of urban development across advanced capitalist countries (e.g. the Americanization of European cities). See Wacquant 2003; Marcuse 2007; Musterd 2008; Tissot 2007.
of poorer migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. The inflammatory statements of Nicola Sarkozy, then Minister of Interior, of his intention to clean the suburbs with a “karcher” (“allusion to a high pressure washer”, Wihtol de Wenden 2005), escalated further the tension in the banlieues. Adding insult to injury, two days before the accident in Clichy-sous-Bois, where two teenagers died, Sarkozy referred to the banlieues’ youngsters, who were involved in rioting, as racaille (scum).

In the past the banlieues were places of sustained and prolonged political mobilizations. Today, however, there is a significant deficit of political representation and mediation. The reasons for the gradual erosion of viable political organizations have been diverse (e.g., severe cuts in state’s financial support to local civic associations since the 1980’s; public authorities’ support to socio-cultural associations rather than to political associations; disillusionment of immigration activists with political parties of the Left and trade unions; the resettlement of political activists into nearby locations) (Poupeau 2006, Hajjat 2005, Wihtol de Wenden ibid). Banlieues’ diminishing organizational density signifies additionally an important intergenerational rupture, which was manifested in the 2005 riots. The youths, who were the protagonists in the riots, had lost respect for the history and political activism of their elders. For the youths, their elders’ political projects and mobilizations had failed to integrate them fully as equal citizens. Youths, experiencing everyday socio-spatial segregation, institutional discrimination, penalization, racism, urban relegation, etc, were dismissive of the moral authority that their elders had acquired in their local communities. Thus, during the riots when the elders (“big brothers”) attempted to calm the spirits, they had hardly any control over the rioting youth (Hajjat ibid).

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20 In the 2005 French riots these two factors were strong indicators of rioting. The cities engaged in rioting were mainly in the west of France, where migrants from sub-Saharan African had recently settled. Extensive rioting also occurred in districts affected by housing renovation projects (Jobard 2008).
The main participants in the French riots of 2005 were a new generation of very young “estate kids” (12 to 25 years old, predominantly male). Most of the rioters were second-, third-, or even fourth-generation immigrants, meaning that they were full French citizens. Many of these youth were still going to school, but many others were dropouts and unemployed. Many also shared a common ‘neighborhood identity.’ It was common in these *banlieues* that youths belonged to gangs that protected local territory from ‘intruders’ (rival gangs, the police, etc.). Youths belonging to the hard core of these neighborhood gangs are often involved in drug dealing or other illicit activities (Body-Gendrot 2009, Petrova 2008). Even youngsters who were not willing to join these local gangs were in contact with them and are sporadically mobilized by them. Still, the majority (60%) of minors and adults arrested during the riots did not have any previous criminal record. Young rioters are not a new phenomenon in France, however, during the 2005 riots their presence became more visible because of the absence of organized collectivities and the youths’ disrespect for the elders. In the 2005 riots, also the significant role of locality in defining the collective identities of these youngsters came to the foreground.

Rioters’ identities were a complex amalgam of diverse and intersecting elements. The rioters who were questioned by the press used the word ‘us’ to define themselves. However, this collective identity was extremely complex and ambivalent since it combined migratory, territorial, social and racial identities that interacted with each other (Jobard 2009). Nevertheless, there were two consistent themes that marked rioters’ identity: citizenship and locality. Rioters expressed first of all their anger at not enjoying the rights that accompany full citizenship. They protested against the institutionalized discrimination they face in employment, housing, education and

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21 Only around 7% of the arrested rioters were foreigners (Roy 2005).
political representation as well as the everyday experience of spatial stigmatization. The young rioters did not ask for any special cultural or religious rights, on the contrary they expressed their anger at the unfulfilled promises of the French Republican model. Hence, in the French riots of 2005, the rioters’ solidarity was founded on a negative element: the denial of equality.

The first factor shaping rioters’ identity was the general claim to full citizenship. The second factor, on the other hand, was related to the limited scope of their life-chances and life-experiences. The social profiles of first-generation immigrants are usually diverse, in contrast to the second-, third- or fourth-generation immigrants, who are confined to segregated and excluded ethnic spaces and therefore share common experiences. Hence the second most important element in rioters’ identity was locality. The rioters were known by the name of the housing projects they inhabited (e.g., cité des 4000 at la Courneuve, see Roy 2005) since locality was a key determinant of their life trajectories. Locality has also shaped the youths’ affiliations. In the banlieues these affiliations are fragmented and conflictual because neighbourhood identities are usually linked to violent conflicts for control over local territories. For some youngsters participation in the riots was an act of affirming their affiliation with their peers or their locality. Rioting also occasionally took the form of competition between different local groups (Silverstein and Tetreault 2006).

However, in the French riots of 2005 these fragmented affiliations came usually together and new spatial solidarities emerged amongst the youths, who mobilized to protect their physical space from state intrusion and regulation. The microlevel of local territory is the only space where the youth can exert autonomous influence in their daily lives. In the French riots, youths clashed violently with the police in order to regain control over their local territories and secure their autonomy from central
state policies. However, their anger at the existing social relations of power and authority was demonstrated within the boundaries of their local districts, since they were unable to extend their mobilization to other parts of French cities.

The city is an important factor in regard to collective mobilization. In the case of social movements it functions as a relational incubator that facilitates complex exchanges, which generate the necessary resources for campaigns at a variety of spatial scales (Walter 2008). Thus location plays a significant role as a nodal point in broader social and political networks. Like social movements, riots do not occur in a social vacuum, but in communities with associational and informal networks. Riots, therefore, activate social ties. However, in riots these ties are predominantly informal and local, isolated from broader networks that can provide resources for long term and sustained mobilization at diverse spatial scales. Therefore, riots are usually geographically and socially circumscribed. Riots differ from social movements also in regard to the assembling and communication processes they encompass. In social movements assembling processes are more centralized than in riots, since organizations play an important role in channeling information and instructions to the broader public. In riots, on the contrary, the assembling processes are more volatile and spatially decentralized, since the communication channels are usually private and informal (e.g. family, friends, acquaintances, civilians, etc.). The significant role of informal and private diffusion of information in riots is illustrated by the fact that riots can occur just on the basis of rumors, transmitted from one person to another.²²

²² Rumours cannot initiate or sustain prolonged, coherent and organized episodes of collective action of social movements.
In the 2005 French riots most youngsters participated in small groups of 10 to 15 people. Rioters adopted hit-and-run tactics, in order to avoid direct confrontation with the highly trained and heavily armed riot police (Jobard 2005). Communication and information was transmitted mainly by the use of mobile phones (and to a lesser extent the internet). Some targets were selected collectively (e.g. collective discussions by youngsters) on the basis of local conflicts (Jobard 2009). Collective action remained localized. Efforts to develop collective action in other parts of the French cities failed. Thus, even though riots took place in most major urban centers across France, they remained confined within the districts of the housing projects. Rioting outside the youngsters’ localities took place only sporadically at the margins of the massive students’ mobilizations against youth labor laws in March-April 2006. Even though the majority of students in the banlieues joined the mobilizations, many youngsters attacked violently the protesters’ In the 2005 French riots, the temporary and fragile coalitions that were made and unmade among actors who were driven together by common problems did not overcome the barriers posed by the spatial and institutional isolation of the banlieues. The lack of supportive social networks and sustained interaction with other organized collectivities restricted the dynamic evolution of the riots. Thus, the French riots vividly illustrated the spatial and social immobility of its participants.

CONCLUSIONS

Riots entail agency (even though the participants may be united by the use of disruptive repertoires, without necessarily sharing long-term solidarities or collective projects) and are contentious in the sense that they challenge existing social norms.

23 There were only two exceptions of organized mobilization by approximately 200 rioters.
and regulations. Thus, riots are not irrational, random and unorganized events as the ‘collective behavior’ model assumes. Riots, however, differ from social movements. They cannot be analyzed by the same causal processes and mechanisms that explain mobilization in social movements. Riots are not coherent or unified events. Riots are volatile, discontinuous and comprise often very contradictory elements. Rioting takes usually place in a number of different and spatially dispersed incidents. In rioting there is a continuous but fragmented process of forming and dissolving, during which multiple shifts occur from planned to spontaneous, nonviolent to violent, collective to individual actions and vice versa. In riots not only the claims of rioters are not clearly articulated, but also their right to act as claim-making subjects is severely contested.

Thus, riots challenge public definitions and perceptions of ‘politics’. Furthermore, riots activate social ties that are predominantly informal and local, isolated from broader networks that can support long term and sustained mobilization at diverse spatial scales. Therefore, riots are usually geographically and socially circumscribed. ‘Riots’ and ‘social movements’ are two concepts that highlight different manifestations of collective action. However, the two concepts should not be perceived as mutually exclusive. Riots may take place within a social movement’s cycle of protest and social movements may emerge from riot events. In the latter case the volatile, fragmented and contradictory elements of rioting are gradually transformed into more coherent, coordinated and sustained episodes of collective action.
Bibliography


